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ABSTRACT

A study identified the structural conditions for workers' perceptions of the need for qualifications and education. It defined qualification requirements based on evaluations of work organization in three workplaces in two companies. Evaluations were used to develop a reference framework for understanding workers' subjective value criteria linked to their work. Findings showed workers were conscious and determined regarding their own training needs; individual experiences and collective norms related to the work situation and expectations of development possibilities played a part in determining workers' qualification requirements; subjective strategies formed the background for individual motivation for training; subjective needs for collectivism and joint discussions among workers had an important role; and subjective processing of contextual conditions was important to workers' attitudes toward processes of change in work and company-related training. Workers' experience of current conditions and development possibilities in companies was decisive for their view of participation in organizational development work and company-related training. Motivation was related to workers' possibilities for planning; development; or interaction in light of their consciousness of potential conflicts, where motivation was related to expectation of consensus development. If consensus was conceived as being defined by conflict avoidance and resignation, motivation for training became ambivalent or completely disappeared. (Contains 38 references) (YLB)

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Christian Kjærsgaard

INDUSTRIAL WORKERS AS RESOURCE PERSONS - SUBJECTIVITY AS AN ELEMENT IN QUALIFICATION ANALYSIS

Abstract

Conditions in working life are changing dramatically in recent years. In many companies a change from fordism to postfordism is on the agenda with new demands to the entire organisation. Many new managerial concepts are developed to ensure a smooth transformation. But reality is far from smooth as lots of interests are involved. In Denmark the Employers Organisations as well as The Unions have developed new strategies, where qualification and education are seen as core notions. A challenge of a traditional socialization among blue collar as well as white collar workers. What influences and constitutes the subjective perspective on the new and better work conditions and personnel development in the job?

In this article I will present some results from my dissertation *Qualification Demands and Motivation for Education*. The problem in focus is: What is the significance of the organisation of work for workers' attitudes in relation to processes of change in work and to participation in company-related training?

The investigation has a double point of departure:

1. in the organisation of work and prerequisites for organising it;
2. in workers' reflections concerning their work and their qualification and training needs.

The specific empirical cases are three different work places at two different companies, and interviews with 28 workers.

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Need of qualification and education, seen from a subjective point of view

The problem of education of industrial workers has been made topical by society's need to include human resources in developing work.

In investigations of workers perspective on needs of qualification and education I analyse the work-organisational relations of the workers and link them to the comments made by workers in individual interviews. By thematising the different subjective strategies of the workers, I illustrate their motivation for participating in developing work organisation and company-related training.

On the basis of group interviews, I illustrate the meaning of collective norms and strategies which are related to workers' experience of the development potential of work, and the qualification perspectives they establish during the interviews.

In the following I will draw conclusions about the outcome of the investigation. As the investigation forms my starting point, I shall start by thematising its empirical points of departure and its results.

Description of the three places of work

The investigation is based on three places of work with very different conditions for including workers' resources and for workers' possibilities of having an impact on their own jobs.

Conditions relating to form of operation and organisation of work

Stelton, one of the two companies, is a small-scale industrial enterprise producing small quantities of stainless steel products for a relatively stable market. Most of the workers are semi-skilled.

Production is separated according to function and items being processed very often circulate several times between the different units. Quality control and repairs of faults are usually not carried out where the fault has occurred.

The company has a decided vertical and horizontal work division which, in the opinion of management, has caused organisational conservation of faulty procedures where the workers' experience and resources are not applied to new developments. In addition, it is the opinion of the management that in the long view the repetitive nature of the work may make it difficult to recruit and keep personnel. While the management sees the need to reorganise the work, it finds it difficult to define new qualification requirements and to enter into dialogue with the personnel about possibilities of development.

In recent years different company-related educational activities have been implemented that focus on conditions having to do with the established organisation of production and the role of the workers. Organisational change has not been the aim and no attempts have been made to follow up these initiatives.

NKT Kraftkabler is the other company in the investigation where two relatively independent production units, *Hall 2* and *Hall 5* form the point of departure.

The company has a tradition of well-developed formalised co-operation between management and shop stewards, also in connection with discussions of organisational changes. Some years ago a framework agreement was made that included both halls. In the framework agreement a number of starting points are described for the group organisation of the work, including the workers' joint responsibility for operating machines, product quality, plans for learning to operate new machinery, defining training needs and taking part in appointing new workers. A coordinator role is also defined: the workers take turns to perform this role for taking care of contacts with management and with other shifts, and the traditional foreman has been replaced by a process leader whose role it is to help groups who run into problems they cannot solve.

An ISO 9001 certification has established specified norms for sub-processes and product quality; a relatively comprehensive educational programme will qualify the workers to meet new challenges, and a new wages agreement is to create incentives for development of flexibility in manning the machines within the groups.

Both skilled and semi-skilled workers work together on production in both halls. Conditions for production in the two halls are different and this has an impact on the challenges that workers are met with.

Hall 2 is an older, re-organised production unit producing electric cables for household installations. Before work was reorganised, the work was strictly vertically and horizontally divided; today production takes place in groups and three shifts work from Monday to Friday. Management is only there during the day.

Production based mainly on orders received means frequent changes in production within a relatively short time horizon which workers must have consideration for when taking care of tasks attached to machine operation and training plans for new machinery. Reduced demand and increased competition in recent years have caused staff cuts.

Hall 5 is a newly established production unit designed with a view to presenting work organisation and new workers have been appointed. Electric cables to lay underground are made here. Production is in five shift operation of workers organised in groups, every day of the week. Management is also only here during the day.

The production flow is relatively clearly defined and changes in production are usually only made a few times in the course of a week. In general the machinery is complicated and there are great variations in problems when operating the machines in different phases of production.

In general production may be said to be organised very differently in all three places of work.

Stelton is a traditionally work-divided company where it is difficult for management to enter into dialogue with the workers concerning potential for organisational change, while at the same time considering it problematic that the workers' resources are not being used.

In Hall 2 reorganisation has meant that the market conditions for the products have had a direct impact on the planning tasks of the workers.

In Hall 5 the workers are left to themselves for a relatively large part of production time. The management-worker division of labour is relatively clearly defined: management plans and the workers implement and have the responsibility concerning machine operations.

Potential for disposition and interaction

The investigation shows that differences in the workers' possibilities for disposition and interaction form the background for differences in workers' reflections concerning their work and their qualification and training needs.

At *Stelton* the workers' possibilities for planning are firmly limited to the individual sub-processes carried out by the individual worker. The extent to which the workers can develop their working areas is limited and primarily dependent on the complexity of the sub-process. The order in which the work is carried out is defined by superiors by means of production cards and quality standards are laid down by superiors on the basis of qualified estimates.

Work-associated interaction takes place to the extent that superiors find it necessary to make use of the workers' experience. Inter-worker interaction is not formalised and takes place exclusively on the initiative of the individual worker. A few production units have developed a division of labour where the workers takes turns to perform heavier tasks.

In *Hall 2* the workers have the possibility to plan machine operation, the sequence of production and personnel administrative planning functions. Interaction is closely related to these functions and the workers help one another at the machines. The need for planning and flexibility in manning the machines is different among the different groups. The production flow is clearly defined in some groups and very difficult to gauge in others. The complexity of the machines diverges correspondingly. Reductions in the number of workers means that there are not equal opportunities in all groups for training other members of the group in operating the machines while continuing the necessary operation of the machinery. In general the coordinators play an active role in communicating information and experience between operators and management.

In *Hall 5* the workers' disposition possibilities are to a higher degree restricted to machine operation itself. Planning is done by management and the workers are only involved in connection with discussion of specific problems connected with the sub-processes which might have significance for coordination. Fewer shifts in production provide fewer opportunities for interaction between the workers; however, the workers help one another with problems and special difficulties concerning machine operation. In general learning to operate a machine is a lengthy process and there are differences in opportunities and need to develop training plans on the shifts in the individual groups.

Five shift operation means that the workers in a group only meet other workers from another two of the group's five shifts, and interaction between them is largely limited to handing over the machines. The primary function of the coordinators is to communicate information between management and the workers on the different shifts.

To sum up: the most important qualification requirements at Stelton have to do with the workers' willingness to accept the established division of labour, while self-regulation and collective responsibility are new, central demands for workers in Halls 2 and 5, where the workers are responsible for organising activities within relatively well-defined terms of reference.

Norms and subjective strategies

The investigation shows that the different conditions for organising work have a constitutive influence on workers' norms and subjective strategies.

At *Stelton* the workers reflect the many conflicts embedded in the organisation of the work.
The work is experienced as being decided by others, finding expression in a lack of opportunity to involve experience or exercise influence. There is conflict between management and workers concerning the organisation and performance of the work, and internally between the superiors and between the workers associated with different production sections.

The established norm, which is expressed in the Hall in particular which is the most clearly work-divided part of the production, has to do with the workers collectively being in opposition to management; there are, however, different opinions as to whether it is of any use to communicate opinions and suggestions to management. There is a lack of a collective perspective of action between the workers themselves.

The conception that the organisation of the work will not change essentially is the background for subjective strategies being limited to development perspectives to do with possibilities for influencing an established division of labour. These are strategies which, to the extent that it is considered realistic, can minimise the conflicts and oppression that the individual experiences at work. In some cases the strategies are converted into formulations of training needs.

The group interviews focus on subordination, hierarchy and conflicts which are experienced in connection with a lack of influence over workers' own work functions. The strategies aim at developing collegial interaction in connection with influencing product quality.

In *Hall 2* there is great variety in how workers experience their potential for exercising influence and also in conditions that create consensus and conflict in the organisation of the work. Although different norms are expressed, all agree that the coordinator should not function as a new foreman.

Some workers state that collegiality that is based on regarding each other as equals is a generally accepted norm.

Others experience conflicts between colleagues as a threat to their identity as qualified workers where the conditions are regarded as part of broader social development.

Others again find that difficult manning conditions for training colleagues establish collegial consensus that frees them from learning to operate new machines which the person in question finds difficult to manage.

A final variety of the conception of norms is linked to the delegation of responsibility without any corresponding delegations of management's powers. A lack of a common perspective among the workers is experienced as a barrier to interaction. There is an organisational vacuum where the workers do not have any possibility of sanctions vis à vis each other which management traditionally has had.

In Hall 2 collective norms are expressed in common for small groups. However, in the group interview there is a common view that the norms of the workers' collective are undergoing change in the current organisation of work, and that a norm of 'we can if we want to' is finding expression in a proposal for training that tries to satisfy the need of the workers to exchange and discuss concrete experiences and perspectives.

There is a widespread common norm in *Hall 5* based on satisfaction with a clearly defined division of labour between management and workers. However, distance to management means that there is a high degree of economic responsibility associated with machine operation which can be heavy when far-reaching financial decisions, such as interrupting a process, have to be made. Such decisions make it necessary for workers to discuss technical problems together and to agree that such decisions form a part of their collective responsibility. This provides legal security for the individual worker.

The workers thus experience so-called common norms as the necessary basis for common legal security. Solidarity with workers on one's shift is vital: one helps

one's colleagues, is not critical of unimportant mistakes and avoids personal conflicts. On the other hand workers do not interfere with problems and conflicts outside their own shift, regarding it as a matter for management if a shift does not live up to the expectations of other workers. If the norms for performing the work are experienced as reduced on a shift, workers regard this as a threat to the collective creative of norms on their own shift and thus a potential reduction of the legal security that has been established. New colleagues and rumours are regarded as possible threats in relation to established norms.

There are different views regarding the possibility of influencing the creation of norms among colleagues, obviously influenced by the workers' seniority. Greater seniority makes technical problems with machinery less of a challenge and the possibilities for helping each other are greater. This combined with a lot of concrete experience of the meaning of common collegial norms may explain the different views of the possibility of influencing the creation of norms.

Educational perspective and educational motivation

The different experiences and views workers have of organisational conditions are converted into different subjective strategies that contribute to constituting the way they define qualification and training needs. On the basis of empirical investigations workers' reflections can be related to different areas of qualification.

1. Workers oriented towards concrete and general technical qualifications

There are different backgrounds at the three places of work for workers who reflect the need for technical qualifications.

At Stelton the need is expressed in connection with experience of suppression of the involvement of experience and conflicts with superiors and colleagues. The subjective strategy is linked to influence on machine operation and product quality. By upgrading qualifications the workers think that to some extent they can liberate themselves from intervention by the foreman. By qualifying their own experience and evaluation criteria they also expect to be able to forward fewer faulty products to colleagues, thus minimising potential collegial conflict.

In Hall 2 the need for technical upgrading of qualifications is expressed by workers with not so much seniority on the basis of their experience that it can be difficult to solve problems associated with machine operation without more comprehensive

technical insight. But they see their need for qualification as being more than purely technical as they also express it as a foundation for being able to function on equal terms with their colleagues.

In Hall 5 there are also workers with relatively little seniority who express this need, here in connection with difficulties in tackling problems of machine operation and as a basis for being able to help colleagues.

In brief it is potential for influence and cooperation that characterise the need for concrete technical qualifications for workers. However, the starting points are very different. At Stelton the need is defined against the background of oppression and conflict; in Hall 2 and Hall 5 it is formulated with a starting point in the possibility of managing jobs on equal terms with colleagues and taking part in an established, collective set of norms. At all three places of work equality and collegial relations are decisive for subjective strategies like this.

2. Workers with an orientation towards personal development

At Stelton the need for qualifications aimed at more personal development is defined by workers who do not experience any technical challenges in their work, and who are constantly confronted with other workers and superiors by virtue of their working functions that are supervisory in nature. The subjective strategy is aimed at avoiding inter-personal conflicts in a job whose content is not expected to change and where the organisation is experienced as being pervaded by power relations.

In Hall 2 the need for personal development is defined by workers who have experienced considerable collegial conflict but who have hitherto been able to tackle the technical challenges of their work. By means of the qualification requirement, a subjective strategy is expressed that aims at developing a dialogue with colleagues involving technical and organisational questions in collegial relations where the workers listen and develop their own thoughts and ideas.

In Hall 5 similar motives are behind the need for personal development for a group of workers with greater seniority. But here the need is linked to an understanding of the meaning of collective norms in relation to legal security concerning decisions involving economy, and an idea that it is possible for workers together to maintain and develop these norms by means of interaction among colleagues. One worker who has experienced pronounced collegial conflict expresses the need as a starting

point for the parties involved to be able to establish necessary collective relations in cooperating with new colleagues.

In sum it is workers who do not experience any technical and organisational challenges in their work who in a more isolated way formulate the need to able to establish constructive dialogue with colleagues and superiors with a view to avoiding conflict.

3. Workers oriented towards concrete and general professional qualifications combined with personal development

At Stelton these broad qualification requirements are defined by workers who in connection with their work see a possibility for escaping from a subordinate position to their superiors and conflict with their colleagues. These workers hope that by qualifying themselves further they can improve their own job security, which they have experienced as insecure in different ways. At the same time the need is defined in connection with a wish to develop together with colleagues.

In Hall 2 the broad qualification requirements are formulated by workers who experience well-developed collegial cooperation. The subjective strategy is linked to qualifying the group's joint decision-making basis and to increasing understanding of the problems experienced in connection with the group's planning. The strategy is linked to a norm of equality, constituted through the possibility of helping one another, building on one another's argumentation and avoiding the emergence of situations where individuals can be accused of being bad colleagues.

In Hall 5 the organisational challenges are experienced as setting limits to planning production and personnel administrative functions. Qualification requirements are almost exclusively formulated in relation to technical problems or development of normative relations between workers.

It is characteristic that the broader qualification requirements in Hall 5 are defined by workers with greater seniority as interaction between personal development and technical qualification, and the need for organisational understanding is formulated in connection with the significance of well-developed collegial relations and the question of legal security.

In sum, the broader qualification requirements are formulated by workers who are able to see the broader development perspective in their work and who experience

the need to qualify discussions concerning the subjective and organisational qualifications with colleagues.

4. Workers with no significant orientation towards training needs

Just under a third of those interviewed said that they had no relevant qualification requirement in relation to their current work.

This attitude is most widespread at Stelton; behind it lie considerably different experiences of possibilities of influencing one's work.

One group of workers have given up: their experience has never been asked for and they feel that they must not demand influence if they are to avoid conflict with superiors. Thus challenges at work do not give rise to qualification requirements, and as no changes in work organisation are expected, they can see no future for possibilities of development in their work.

Another group also see no changes in work organisation; however, they do not formulate the same resigned attitude to their possibilities for exercising influence. On the other hand they consider themselves to be qualified for the job they are doing, and as they do not expect changes they regard further training superfluous.

In Hall 2 there exist two differences types of reasons among workers who do not experience a need for qualification.

In the case of some of the workers, their anxiety about not being able to live up to demands regarding more complicated machinery and simultaneous difficulty in establishing collegial training makes them feel that there is a consensus that they are not forced to take on challenges. At the same time fixed division of labour is regarded as minimising the desired collegial interaction.

In the case of another worker in a different context, the experience of a lack of joint collegial development of the division of labour in the group makes further participation in training meaningless.

In Hall 5 none of the interviewees felt that they lacked the motivation to participate in company-related training.

In sum, it is striking that the workers who did not express any need for training *linked their lack of motivation to a lack of perspective in their work in a very direct*

manner. As these workers did not think that changes would happen, they were resigned in conflict-ridden experiences of subordination for fear of not being able to manage greater challenges associated with more complex machinery, or because of a lack of joint collegial perspective. Only 2 of those interviewed did not express any real training need because they felt they could manage their current tasks. These 2 also gave as a reason for their lack of motivation for further training that they did not expect their work to change decisively in nature.

Perspectives in the light of the investigation

In my investigation I have attempted to identify the structural conditions for workers' possibilities for planning and interaction; I have further attempted to define qualification requirements on the basis of economically and politically determined evaluations of established work organisation in specific manufacturing companies. With these evaluations I have established an empirical reference framework for understanding the workers' subjective value criteria linked to their work which the workers have reflected in interviews.

The investigation has shown:

1. *That the workers are indeed very conscious and formulated with regard to their own training needs.*
2. *That individual experiences and collective norms in relation to the work situation and expectations of development possibilities play a part in determining workers' qualification requirements.*
3. *That subjective strategies form the background for the individual worker's motivation for training.*
4. *That subjective needs for collectivism and for joint discussions among the workers have an important role to play.*
5. *That the subjective processing of contextual conditions is important with regard to workers' attitude to processes of change in work and company-related training.*

By taking the point of departure in the workers' subjective reflections, complexes of problems which are of crucial importance to the workers' motivation for training have become visible.

Workers' experience of their current conditions and development possibilities in the companies is decisive for their view of participation in organisational development work and company-related training.

Through the subjective approach, new concepts are added to the politically and economically defined qualification analysis linked to the on-the-job problems experienced by workers and to the significance of collegial norms. These norms have considerable weight both where workers experience themselves as being isolated form each other and where they experience mutual interdependence. Thus motivation for training can be related to workers' possibilities for planning and the possibilities for development that they experience in this regard.

In addition motivation can be related to workers' possibilities for interaction in the light of their consciousness of potential conflicts, where motivation is usually related to expectation of the development of consensus. However, if consensus is conceived as being defined by resignation about conflicts, motivation for training becomes ambivalent or completely disappears.

It is quite crucial for workers' motivation to participate in company-related training that they can see a development perspective.

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THE INFLUENCE OF EDUCATION FOR THE UNEMPLOYED ON THE LABOUR MARKET IN SLOVENIA IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS (1993-1997)

The Unemployement Issue in Slovenia in the Last Five Years Period

In Slovenia we were facing a rapidly growing unemployment at the end of the eighties and the beginning of the nineties. From the 1.3% registered unemployment rate in 1980 we jumped to 5.3% in 1990, reaching 13.8% registered rate by 1992. The main reasons for growing unemployment lay in the change of social, political and economic system. So, they are originated from the transition from the centralised to market oriented economy and to the fact of Slovenia gaining its independence from the prior state of Yugoslavia where Slovenia used to be one of the six republics.[1]

It has become clear that in the centralised (socialist) economy there used to be employed a non-productive (unproductive) workforce. By the end of the eighties it became evident that this was the cause of the bad productivity results and of productivity decrease which had been going on for several years. In 1992, when the registered unemployment rate grew rapidly to 13.8% we still believed that the growth would somehow get stabilised within the following five years period. The most optimistic prognosis had even predicted its decrease. Unfortunately the data show the opposite, the registered unemployment rate show an increase to 15% in

[1] I explained in detail the reasons and the situation in my presentation for the first international conference of the Adult Education and Labour Market Network, published in Adult Education and the Labour Market, ed. by Henning Salling Olesen and Tanja Vilič Klenovšek, Slovene Adult Education Centre, Ljubljana 1994.

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